NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, 79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.

No. 521 NEW YORK, DECEMBER 22, 1906. Price, Five Cents

# THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

## OR NICK CARTER'S COMPLEX CASE

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

"Good morning, Hampton," said Nick; "I am really sorry to be obliged to disturb this little family gathering. You had better put away that gun; you see I have none—in sight."

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No. 521. NEW YORK, December 22, 1906. Price Five Cents.

Sat. Mch. 23, 1912.
Sat. Feb. 7, 1920.

# The Mysterious Stranger

## OR,

# NICK CARTER'S COMPLEX CASE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

### CHAPTER I.

THE MURDERED CASHIER.

"I thought at one time that I would send for you, Mr. Carter, and ask you to look into the case. Then I concluded to await the result of certain investigations that are now under way. Hampton was the last man in the world to be guilty of intrigue or dishonesty, in my opinion. However, we cannot rely entirely upon our impressions."

"Impressions are often misleading," returned the detective. "However, I have never known a national bank to give a cashier the benefit of the doubt."

"There is one impression that remains faithful to me," said the banker, "and that is that there is a deep mystery involved in the case somewhere."

"What makes you think there is a mystery, Mr. Barnes?"

"I have no tangible reason. I felt it in the air when I called upon his daughter. Hampton has been in my employ, note-teller and cashier, in my bank for twenty-eight years. Since his death an expert has been working on his accounts. Thus far there has been no mistake or discrepancy in the slightest particular. I suppose the affair has shocked me."

"What family did he leave?" asked the detective.

"A son and a daughter. When I called there to offer my condolences, I was conscious of a something in the air in that house—something mysterious. It was in his daughter's eyes, I think. There was something there that was more than mere sorrow."

"How old is the daughter?"

"I should say she is thirty years old. The son is ten years younger. You knew Hampton, didn't you, Carter?"

"I knew him by sight, I believe. He was a tall man with a very bald head, was he not—and a smooth-shaven face?"

"Yes, bald; with a fringe of iron-gray hair. He stood about six feet."

"The papers said Hampton had been killed by an unknown man who had made his escape, and that the police were on the lookout for him. Is that the mystery you

allude to?" asked the detective. "Or is there something else?"

The banker, Alexander Barnes, was silent for a full minute, and, then dropping his voice, he said:

"I wish you would go up there to the house, and look around, Mr. Carter, just as you would do if you were an old friend of Hampton's. Simply go up there and look around."

Nick Carter smiled.

"If there is a mystery there, I will trust the police force to find it," he said.

"The police force is already busy," said Mr. Barnes. "I am under the impression that the young woman and the young man both need a friend, or will do so soon."

"In that case, send for me if you want me, and I promise to go there and look the ground over."

The two men had met on the elevated train on their way down-town in the morning, and as Nick Carter's destination only took him as far as Cortlandt Street station, when the guard announced that street he rose, and, bidding his friend good morning, he left him with the usual lack of ceremony in vogue when traveling on elevated trains in New York City.

It was merely a chance conversation between two men who had met entirely by accident. The banker possibly would never have sent for Nick Carter to come to him, nor have looked him up, to voice any idea whatever in connection with the death of his cashier, but meeting him as he had, it had seemed the natural thing to do.

Nick Carter was destined to hear more about the case, and that very soon.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when he arrived home, and his key had only time to click in the latch when Joseph, his faithful valet, was on hand to greet him, wearing the expression of concern on his face that spoke as plainly as words when he had something of import to communicate.

"A young man to see you, sir. He is waiting in the small reception-room," said Joseph.

"Any one you have ever seen before?" was the responsive query.

"I never saw him before," was the reply. "He seems to be in some kind of trouble," he added, as he took Nick Carter's coat and hat. "I seated him in the small room so that he would not be disturbed if other callers came."

As the detective appeared on the threshold of the room in which his caller was awaiting him, a tall young man of possibly twenty years of age rose to greet him. His very black hair and eyes accentuated his pallor, and his features were stamped with anxiety apparent to the most casual observer.

"How do you do, Mr. Carter?" he said, by way of salutation. "My name is Hampton; Frank Hampton."

"The son of——"

"Yes," he interrupted, in anticipation of what the detective would say. "Peter Hampton, of the Almquist Bank, was my father. I have here a letter of introduction to you from Mr. Alexander Barnes, president of the bank."

"I remember," responded the detective, as much to himself as aloud, recalling the conversation of the morning, and unfolding the sheet of paper which he extracted from the envelope addressed to him, he read as follows:

"MY DEAR CARTER: This will introduce to you Frank Hampton. Please give him a little of your time, as a great favor to me. He is in need of a friend.

"Yours truly, ALEXANDER BARNES."

"I understand. Come into my study," said the detective kindly. "We can talk there without fear of being disturbed."

Nick Carter led the way into a room which he called his own private den, and closed the door.

"Now, then, Mr. Hampton," he said, "compose yourself, and tell me what you have on your mind. If it is in my power to help you, I can assure you that I will do so."

"I have so much on my mind, Mr. Carter, that I do not know where to begin. Facts and suspicions, dreams and realities are so mixed up that I have nearly lost my reason."

"How old are you, Frank?" asked the detective.

"I am in my twentieth year."

"And you have a sister?"

"Yes. My sister is ten years older than I am."

"Your mother is not living?"

"No, sir. She died ten years ago."

"Do you think you can tell me about this tragedy? I have read about it in the papers, but the facts are not impressed upon my mind to any extent."

"That is what I want to do. My father was expecting —or—a man was expected to—a man whom he knew—— You see, my brain is nearly addled, Mr. Carter. Let me think a minute and——"

"There, there, my boy!" said the detective sympathetically, as his visitor interrupted himself again and again. "How would you like to have me ask you questions, and get the story from you in that way?"

"Thank you very much, sir. I guess I might be able to give you the facts if you put one question at a time to me. I am horribly nervous."

"It is not to be wondered at. You are young to come in contact with crime."

"I have always been called a dreamer, Mr. Carter. This seems to be no time for dreaming, but I find myself quite unprepared for the lesson given to me to learn."

"You go to school?"

"Yes, and live inside of book covers, practically. Nothing has ever been expected of me."

"Of whom does your family consist?"

"My sister and I are now alone. We were only four in

the family. Preston, a colored man, who has been with us for years, made the fourth member of our family."

"Do you live in an apartment?"

"No, in a house which my father owns, or did own."

"Were you at home the evening of the tragedy?"

"No. I took dinner with a school friend that evening, and did not get home until nine o'clock."

"Are you in the habit of dining out with your friends?"

"I don't think I ever did so more than two or three times in my life."

"Did you, as a family, entertain much at dinner? I mean, did you often have company?"

"Rarely. My father disliked company."

"Your father was a nervous man?"

"Very. He was not in good health."

"He was often irritable?"

"Yes. You see, he was so shut up in an office, and had so little exercise and fresh air, that his mode of living tended to make him very nervous."

"He was not in the habit of taking stimulant?"

"No. He drank a great deal of very strong tea. I never knew him to drink liquor."

"Had your sister a sweetheart?"

"I think she had. At least, she used to receive letters regularly from some one out in the West. I paid no attention to her affairs, as they did not interest me."

"How old did you say she is?"

"She is in her thirtieth year. Ten years older than I."

"She was fond of your father?"

"Perfectly devoted to him. I was not in it with them. That is, I think, one reason why I turned to my books."

"I see. Is your sister a handsome woman?"

"Yes, I think so. She always looks handsome to me. Maybe I am not a judge."

"Tell me about your home-coming. No, I will question you about it."

"All right, sir."

"Who took dinner at your house?"

"My father and my sister. Mr. Van Epps called later in the evening. I think his first name is Judd."

"Did you see him?"

"No, sir. But I know there was a quarrel of some sort. My father was killed. My sister has been arrested, and so has Preston."

"I had not heard that your sister had been arrested," said the detective. "That is news to me. I don't wonder that you are excited."

"It will all be in the morning papers."

"But your sister did not kill your father?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Carter. She loved him. How could she kill him? She would have fought for him."

"Poor girl!" said Nick Carter. "I am sorry for you both. But you must have courage. I believe that right and justice prevail in the end."

"But think of the disgrace; and the ruin to her life and mine; it seems to me that if some one should accuse me of killing my father, I would have a hard time proving that I was not even there. No one would listen, and with every one accusing me, I would soon get to doubt my own senses."

"No, I don't think you would," Nick Carter responded, smiling. "You are overwrought now. You will grow calmer after a little. Now, another question: What has your sister done to arouse suspicion?"

"Why, she told one story, and Preston told another. That was where the hitch came in. Both insist that a man came there, but in the details they differ. I can't tell just how it was they told their stories."

"They should have made no statement," said Nick Carter. "Many persons incriminate themselves by talking too much."

"Preston has been arrested, too, as an accessory, I believe."

"Naturally. Where is your sister?"

"She is at home. Mr. Alexander Barnes furnished bail for my sister, or she would now be locked up in the Tombs, I suppose."

"What happened after you reached home that night?"

"I found my sister unconscious on the divan. She went from one fainting-spell into another all that night. I thought she would die."

"Did you go for a physician?"

"I wanted to, but Preston urged me not to. He said the quieter we kept the better for us all. I was so frightened, I lost all my sand. We never know what we will do, until we are put to the test. I begin to think I never did have any sand."

"What did you do finally?"

"I telephoned to the police-station without telling Preston what I was going to do. He was furious."

"Why was he furious?"

"He said it was not time yet to notify the authorities. He said: 'We are not ready, yet?'"

"Who was not ready, yet?"

"He and I, or my sister, I suppose. There was no one else."

"Where was your father's body all this time?"

"In the library."

"Did the tragedy occur in the library?"

"That was where lay the difference in the story told by sister and the one told by Preston. She said the quarrel was in the library; he said it was in the dining-room."

"Quite a discrepancy. Their story was not well learned," said the detective.

"You don't think my sister killed my father, do you, Mr. Carter?"

"I don't think anything about it, Frank."

"Of course not, sir, since you know so little of the details."

"You say you never saw this man Van Epps?"

"I have seen his picture only."

"Where?"

"My sister has it."

"Ah, indeed!"

"The most incredible thing I have to tell you is this, Mr. Carter. The tragedy, you know, occurred night before last. Last night, as I had not slept in thirty-six hours, I lay down to get a little rest. Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Carter?"

"I do not, Frank."

"Well, sir, my father's spirit appeared to me."

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE MAN IN THE COFFIN.

Nick Carter listened incredulously, and as his guest appeared to become excited at the recollection, he smiled kindly and sought to reassure him.

"Ghosts can usually be explained, Frank," he said. "I have never seen one that proved to be transparent."

"I certainly saw my father's ghost, Mr. Carter."

"What did the ghost have to say for itself?"

"You are making light of me," responded the young man.

"Well, well, since you are really in earnest, you shall tell me all about it," said the detective. "Now, then, suppose you tell me consecutively what happened."

"I had gone to bed on a couch in the room adjoining the one occupied by my father when he was living. That room is up-stairs on the second floor. I was awakened by the consciousness that some one was in the room, and when I opened my eyes the form of my father stood directly before the chiffonier, and he was shaving.

"I could hear the razor as it scraped up and down his chin. My father always shaved rapidly, and sometimes walked to and fro in the room as he did so, for he never had to look in the glass during the operation.

"Can you fancy how I felt, Mr. Carter? Why, my blood froze in my veins. I was paralyzed, turned into stone. There was a dim light shining into the room from the hall. The figure moved about the room, all the time the razor scraping, scraping, scraping. Finally it glided to the chiffonier to place the razor back in the case with the others. This done, it passed out of the room."

"And you? What did you do?"

"What did I do?" repeated Frank Hampton. "I broke into a cold sweat, and could move neither hand nor foot. I suffocated, and thought I was dying. When finally I did pull myself together, I seemed like one wakening from a horrible nightmare. I hardly knew whether it was real, or only a fearful dream. I dared not stir for fear it was real; I dared not lie still, for fear it would repeat itself."

The detective stared at him thoughtfully.

"I see that you doubt me," continued Frank Hampton.

"What did you do, when finally you did get up from the couch?"

"I went to the chiffonier to see if the razors were there."

"Were they?"

"They were. Seven of them. I counted them. My father had a razor for each day of the week. He was as methodical about everything as that. I don't suppose he ever used Wednesday's razor on Tuesday in his life."

"Imagination does strange things with us, sometimes," said the detective, smiling kindly.

"I suppose what I have told you must sound pretty garbled, Mr. Carter. I wish I could make the facts clearer."

"The facts are evidently far from clear to you, my boy, so you could hardly make them clear to me. But I wouldn't worry about the ghost if I were you."

"Indeed, I have tried not to, sir. It is, of course, a mere side issue. My mind has been so harassed with every phase of the case that I do not know where I stand. I don't even know what I think. I try not to think."

"That is much the wisest plan."

"Do you think you could come up to the house with me? I want you to meet my sister."

"Your sister has friends with her?"

"Strange to say, she has not. You know one can live in New York and still be very much alone."

"Women usually have friends among their own sex," said the detective dryly.

"My sister had formal visiting acquaintances. They probably hesitate to intrude upon her now. My father did not approve of our having company. We lived very much in ourselves. In fact, I have never thought much about it. My books were all the friends I have ever needed."

The detective's questions had been put in a very friendly, conversational tone, without in the least savoring of cross-examination.

He was already in possession of many of the facts as they had been set forth by the newspapers, so that the few questions he had asked of Frank Hampton were more in the nature of establishing an acquaintance with the young man than of gaining important information.

"I came here, Mr. Carter, to beg you to come to our house to see my sister. You will come with me?"

"Yes, my boy, I will go."

"Oh, thank you, sir; indeed, I cannot tell you how grateful I am."

"What I want you to do, Frank, is to get a firm hold on yourself. I realize that the ordeal through which you have passed has been a terrible one; but you are a man—in size, if not in years; and it is your place to be a staff upon which your sister may lean."

"I mean to be that, sir," said the young man, choking back a sob that had succeeded in accumulating in a great lump in his throat. As he said it he threw back his shoulders and stood very straight, and Nick Carter thought he looked a very promising young fellow, and that there was no evidence of the faint heart which had so plainly demonstrated itself in their recent conversation.

"Whatever happens to your sister, Frank, you must stand by her. Her position is a terrible one."

"She has a much stronger nature than I. My father always said she should have been the boy and I the girl."

"But she is much older than you. Ten years makes a great difference. But, come, we will go to your house at once," added Nick Carter, rising, and so together they passed out of the house.

In one of the cross-streets of the West Side of Manhattan there stands a short block of two-story-and-basement houses. There is not another block similar to them in this section of Greater New York. It looks, indeed, as if a small portion of Brooklyn had been set down in this borough. Old residents know exactly where this block is located, and it is not best to mention names here. A tragedy is of no benefit to any house-owner. It does not enhance the value of property.

Frank Hampton preceded the detective as they ascended the front steps of his home. There was no evidence that anything had occurred out of the ordinary. Indeed, it is doubtful if the neighbors were cognizant of it, unless they had read the newspapers.

The fact that no one cares about neighbors in a great city is offset by the fact that every one is busy minding his own business.

In this case, a man was dead, and that was all.

Young Hampton turned the key in the night-lock, and then stood back for Nick Carter to enter.

The interior was of the usual New York house order. The hall was narrow, and from it opened folding doors into the parlor. In the rear a door opened into the back parlor, which was used as a library. In the basement were the dining-room and kitchen. On the second floor were three bedrooms and bathroom. There was no more room than in the ordinary apartment.

The doors into the parlor were closed. The body of the murdered man occupied the room—the sole occupant.

"Follow me into the library, Mr. Carter, please," said young Hampton.

A table-lamp with a dark-green shade, from which hung a fringe of dark-green irridescent beads, threw every article in the room into shadow.

Two persons, a man and a woman, rose to greet them as they entered.

"My sister, Mr. Carter," said young Hampton, introducing the detective. Then as he recognized the banker, his late father's employer, he greeted him with a silent hand-clasp.

"How do you do, Mr. Carter, and thank you for acceding to my request," said Mr. Barnes. "I am glad to meet you here, for there are many things I would like to say to you." Then, turning to Miss Hampton, he added: "Mr. Carter knew your father. He is a friend."

"It is kind of you to come," said the young woman, extending her hand to the detective.

Nick Carter noted that the hand she gave him lay limp in his own without the least suggestion of pressure. He took occasion to study her closely, and he saw that while she was a finely built woman, straight as an arrow, with something of the element of command in her personality, her face was so reserved, showed such repression, that beauty did not enter into its composition. And yet, the same face, if animated, might have been a beautiful one, for the features were regular.

"Mr. Barnes has just brought unpleasant news," she said quietly. "I have not yet recovered from the shock of it."

"I thought best to come here with the unpleasant information myself; that I, perhaps, could save Miss Hampton some pain," said the banker, turning to Nick Carter.

"Yes?" responded the detective inquiringly.

"We have found some deplorable discrepancies in the books."

"Indeed! How much?"

"Thirty-five thousand dollars."

"Isn't it dreadful?" ejaculated Miss Hampton, pressing her handkerchief to her face and shaking with sobs. Her brother sought to comfort her, but with no success, and weeping violently she left the room.

"Has there been an inquest?" asked the detective.

"This morning," replied young Hampton laconically. "The verdict was that my father was murdered by some person, name unknown, and my sister has been placed under arrest as an accessory. Preston, our colored servant, was taken to the Tombs."

"I would like to take a look around," said Nick Carter, rising and going directly to the doors closed between the front parlor and the library.

"They are locked," he said briefly, when he discovered the fact.

"My sister has the key, I believe," said young Hampton. "I will get it."

But he returned in a few minutes with the information that it would be impossible to view the remains.

The detective scrutinized him thoughtfully for an instant.

"Go to your sister and say to her that I make no idle request, and that I must enter the room containing the remains of her father."

Frank Hampton departed on his errand, and he had no sooner left the room than the detective quietly opened the locked double doors with his skeleton key, and then,

beckoning to Mr. Barnes, the two men passed into the front parlor and closed the doors and locked them.

The interior of the room bore the unmistakable insignia of death.

The shades were drawn, and the inside blinds closed. One window was raised slightly for air. A rosewood casket stood in the middle of the room. All was somber.

It was impossible to imagine that the room had ever been used for anything else than the incident at hand. The chairs and tables stood about respectfully, and there was the stuffy heavy fragrance of funeral flowers.

The cover of the casket was securely screwed down. It was evident that the remains were not to be viewed.

This time the tool convenient to the occasion came from Nick's pocket-case, and in a few minutes the body within the casket was exposed to view.

The detective lifted the cloth that was spread over the face and the two men looked upon the features of the dead man.

The sight was a ghastly one. The face had been battered beyond recognition. It was covered in spots with pieces of court-plaster, but the discoloration was apparent.

"How changed!" gasped the banker. "I should never have recognized him. Even the nose seems different in shape. I dare say the drawn look of death is what has changed it."

"Possibly," said Nick Carter briefly.

"Strange to put a sack suit on a dead man," reflected the banker, aloud.

"He has been very clean-shaven," said the detective. "As I recall Hampton, it seems to me that he had short hairs on the top of his bald head. I wonder who shaved him."

"Hampton had fallen off lately," commented the banker, in subdued tones. "I suppose he was worried. Only a week ago I said to him that he needed a change. He looked thin and haggard. He replied that he would take his vacation early in the season."

"I don't think he intended to take a vacation," responded the detective.

"Probably not."

"Did I understand you to say that the tampering with the books was of rather recent date?"

"Yes; barely more than a year."

"I wonder what he wanted money for? He lived simply, and I would not have taken him for a sport."

"The last man in the world."

"Still, you never can tell about these old chaps," said the detective.

"Yes," was the response. "Still waters run deep."

"How long had Hampton been in your employ?"

"Twenty-eight years."

"He was always a methodical man, that is, in his habits?"

"Always. You could have set your watch by his comings and goings."

"You don't think he speculated?"

"I am almost positive that he did not. He was not even interested in the market, save in a general way. Anything exciting attracted him, and he was the first one to inquire into the cause of it. He had no patience with a man risking his all, and when he heard of such an instance, even if the result made him a winner, he was annoyed just the same, and denounced the transaction in strong terms."

"Those ideas do not, as a rule, belong with a gambler."

"Decidedly not."

The cover of the casket had been removed, and the body lay exposed to view from head to foot.

"How tall a man looks lying down," remarked the banker. "Now, I would have taken Hampton for a shorter man."

"I never called him tall, recalling the impression I had of him."

"The body seems crowded, as if the coffin didn't fit. The shoulders are hunched a good deal. Do you notice?" asked the banker.

The detective nodded. Nick Carter did not always voice all that he thought.

"Poor fellow!" said the banker, with a sigh of genuine regret. "But you have gone to that bourne whence travelers, even absconders, never return."

Nick Carter scanned the clothing of the man in the coffin closely. There was the appearance in the lines of the garments that they were not large enough in some places, and too large in others. Then the detective made an exclamation. He had discovered something.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE MYSTERY BEYOND THE DOOR.

It so happened that the banker's back was turned at the instant when the detective uttered the exclamation, but he wheeled quickly at the sound.

"What is it?" he asked. "What have you discovered?"

For a full minute Nick did not reply; but he stood with his eyes steadfastly fixed upon the handsome features of the financier; then he said, speaking very slowly, and creating his emphasis solely by enunciation:

"Mr. Barnes, how well did you know Peter Hampton?"

"I don't know what you mean by that question, Carter," was the reply.

"Just what I said. No more! no less. How well did you know Peter Hampton?"

"You wish me to reply literally?"

"Yes."

"I knew him as well—I think—as one man can know

another after twenty-eight years of familiar business intercourse during which time there has been no social intercourse whatever. Is that a sufficient answer?"

"Not quite. Let me put several questions into one."

"Very well."

"You have been for many years the president of the Almquist Bank; you have always been a stockholder in the bank; you have always been connected with it; your connection with the bank is due to an inheritance; that is all correct, is it not?"

"Quite."

"You are a man of large affairs outside of your interest in the bank; you frequently are absent from the city or from the country for weeks or months at a time?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever, during the twenty-eight years or more that you have known Peter Hampton, left your affairs solely in his charge? Has he ever been the man in whom you believed that you could implicitly trust? Answer me 'square from the shoulder,' if you please."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I cannot answer that question."

"Again, why not?"

"I don't know how to answer it. I don't know why I haven't quite trusted him."

"Very well—let us drop that phase of the question. You have just told me that you knew nothing of the man or his family socially. Is that quite correct?"

"Entirely so."

"Then here is the question to which I would like you to give me a perfectly frank reply: Why, under all the circumstances of this rather remarkable case, with the news fresh to your hand that Peter Hampton was a defaulter to the amount of thirty-five thousand dollars, are you so anxious to befriend the son—and the daughter—of the defaulting cashier?"

"Why, Carter, that seems a strange question to come from you at——"

"Please answer it, Mr. Barnes."

"Oh, well,"—the banker shrugged his shoulders—"call it mere common humanity, if you will. Call it anything you please. It is my pleasure. That is sufficient."

"Suppose that the cashier, instead of lying here before us, a corpse—a murdered man—suppose that the cashier, instead of being dead, were alive? Suppose the case, I say. Would you still be as willing to stand in the breach between that daughter and son, and the troubles they have to meet, as you are with the knowledge that the man is dead?"

The banker stepped back two paces from the casket. His face flushed and then paled. His fingers worked nervously in the palms of his hands; and then with some show of petulance he replied:

"I don't know what the devil you mean, Carter! I don't know what in blazes you are driving at!"

"Don't you? Shall I tell you?"

"Yes."

"Very well. This body here is not the corpse of Peter Hampton. Peter Hampton is not dead. He has not been murdered—*but he is a murderer!*"

The banker could only stare. His lips moved but no sound came from them; and he endeavored to moisten them with his tongue in the effort to speak. And the detective continued:

"Your cashier is not dead—he has not been murdered. But, as I said just now, he is a murderer. Instead of being killed by the stranger who called upon him, he has killed that stranger. Instead of being the victim of a person whose name we are told is Judd van Epps, he has made his guest the victim and is now himself at large. Haven't you guessed it?"

"No."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes."

"Then will you tell me why, when we met in the car to-day, you inferred that there was an unusual mystery here?"

"I can't tell you that. It was intuitive, I suppose."

The detective remained silent for a full minute, during which he steadily regarded the banker; and then, in a low tone, he said:

"I wish that I could entirely believe you, Mr. Barnes."

The banker flushed hotly. He started back, and an angry retort came to his lips, but was suppressed before it found utterance.

For a moment he turned his back to the detective, but then wheeling in his tracks he said:

"Let us get out of here, Carter. Let us get away from this house. Come with me to——"

The detective had already replaced the lid of the casket and was now screwing it down; but he replied:

"We will leave the room now, Mr. Barnes. You can leave the house at once when we are outside. If you will go to your own home and wait for me there, I will go to you as soon as I can do so."

"Why not accompany me at once?" asked the banker.

"Because I feel that my duty is here—for a time. Presently I will follow you."

They had crossed the room to the door and as the detective was about to unlock it, he hesitated, and then seizing the banker lightly by the arm he said, in a low tone:

"Not a word to anybody of our suspicions."

He opened the door then, and they passed into the other room, discovering, as Nick had suspected they would do, that Cynthia Hampton was waiting there for them.

Her placid face showed no more expression than it

had when Nick Carter saw it first, save that there was a furtive gleam in the depths of her eyes.

She stepped forward to meet them as they came from the room of death, and in that slow, even voice which no words can describe she said:

"I am sorry—very sorry, indeed—that you went in there, gentlemen. You should not have done so against my wishes. I could not bear that anybody should see—should see him in the condition in which you found him."

She shuddered as she spoke, and Nick thought if this were acting, she was, indeed, a remarkable woman; but he replied evenly:

"Have you forgotten, Miss Hampton, that at this moment you stand practically charged with the murder of your father?"

"No," she replied, as calmly as before.

"I have been asked to come here to defend you from the consequences of that charge. It is necessary, therefore, that I should include every detail in my investigation."

The banker interrupted them before she could reply.

"You will pardon me," he said, "but I feel that I must really leave you. No doubt, Carter, you will wish to talk further with Miss Hampton, so I will not ask you to come; but remember, please, that I hope you will do everything in your power to defend her from the possible consequences of the foul charge that has been made against her."

Frank Hampton, who was also in the room, accompanied the banker to the outer door, and as he was leaving the room Nick said to him:

"I wish, Frank, that you would leave us alone together for a time. I wish to talk with your sister, and I think we can understand each other better if we are not interrupted."

Cynthia Hampton had dropped into a chair, and she did not even appear to have heard the detective's remark; and when Nick turned toward her, she raised her eyes to his with all the meekness and resignation of a suffering woman who still has much to undergo, and who is willing to meet it—since there appears to be no other way.

"Miss Hampton," said the detective.

"Yes?" she replied, in that same even tone which was almost expressionless.

"I have an important question to ask of you."

"Yes?"

"Whose body is that which now lies dead in the adjoining room?"

Miss Hampton's face did not change. Her eyes did not falter; and she replied:

"My father's."

"I ask the question," continued the detective, "because I wished to assure myself that you are positive about that. The face is battered—pardon me, but I must refer to these things——"

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"The face is battered beyond all possibility of recognition, and I thought it possible—even probable that there may have been some doubt in your mind, Miss Hampton."

"Not at all, Mr. Carter."

"Who is, or was, this Judd van Epps, who called upon your father? I suppose you regard him as the murderer, do you not?"

"Frankly, I do not, Mr. Carter. I think the deed must have been committed by an outsider; a burglar, possibly, or by some other person who was admitted to the house without my knowledge."

"Indeed? We will discuss that point later. Tell me now, who is Judd van Epps?"

"I do not know, sir, save that he bore that name, and that he came to see my father at long intervals."

"Had you no personal acquaintance with the man?"

"None."

"You knew him by sight?"

"Barely. I am not sure that I did."

"But you saw him when he came here to see your father this time?"

"Yes; I saw him. Barely more than that."

"If you were brought face to face with him now, would you recognize him?"

"I am not sure. Possibly."

"Describe his looks to me as well as you can."

She hesitated a moment, and then:

"He was a tall man, I think, though I do not think as tall as my father, and I should say that he was even more spare in build. His hair was iron-gray——"

"Did he have a full head of hair?"

"I am not certain about that, but I think so. He wore his hat when I saw him."

"And a beard? Or mustache?"

"Neither, I think."

"Had he any peculiarity of gait or manner that you recall?"

"No, sir."

"Who admitted him to the house?"

"Preston—our servant."

"Did he ask at once to see your father?"

"I think so. I know that he almost brushed past Preston and walked straight to the door of the library, which he opened without knocking. My father was inside that room. The stranger entered and closed the door behind him."

"And after that, what happened? Tell me as exactly as you can, please."

The detective had drawn forward a chair, and now sat facing the young woman.

## CHAPTER IV.

### A WOMAN'S STRANGE STORY.

Miss Hampton was on the point of replying, when the detective stopped her.

"One moment before you answer, please. First tell me exactly where you stood; and where Preston was standing."

"I was on the stairs at the time; half-way to the second floor, I think. Preston was in the hall below me."

"And now, just what happened after the stranger entered the library and closed the door after him?"

"Why, nothing in particular. I heard my father start to his feet and utter an exclamation. I did not hear what words he used."

"Anger? Surprise? Pleasure?"

"Certainly not pleasure; nor do I think it was anger. Surprise—yes."

"And then?"

"I could hear the murmur of their voices for some time. I stood there on the stairs for two or three minutes. Not more than that."

"Their voices were raised, or lowered, Miss Hampton?"

"Both. Sometimes raised. Sometimes so low that they came to me only in a murmur."

"It was because they were raised at first that you lingered on the stairs?"

"Yes; I think so."

"Did you feel any apprehension that there might be trouble?"

"I don't think I could give my feeling so grave a term as that. I felt that the actions of the stranger in forcing himself into the presence of my father, and his action in starting to his feet as he did, were not natural: so I lingered for a moment or two."

"And then your misgivings, if you had any, were forgotten?"

"They were at least dismissed."

"What did you do then?"

"I returned to my room."

"And Preston——"

"Preston returned to his duties, I suppose."

"Where was your brother?"

"I do not know. He was not in the house."

"What was the next incident in connection with this affair that you recall?"

"When I heard the sound of quarreling in the library."

"Tell me about that. Where were you at the time?"

"I was again midway on the stairs in the act of descending them."

"Where was Preston at that time?"

"I do not know."

"What was it that you heard?"

"The sound of angry voices proceeding from beyond the library door."

"Your father's voice, and the voice of the stranger, of course."

"I certainly supposed so at the time."

"Could you understand any of the words that were used?"

"No, sir. Both men appeared to be talking at once."

"You are sure that they were quarreling?"

"Oh, yes. There is no doubt of that."

"And then, what happened?"

"I thought I heard the sound of a blow, followed by a fall—but I was not sure even of that much."

"Did the voices cease after that?"

"Yes. Instantly."

"What did you do?"

"I hastened to the door and rapped against it, at the same time turning the knob. It was fastened."

"And then, what did you do?"

"I called through the door—called to my father."

"And did you receive a reply?"

"Yes. At once."

"In your father's voice?"

"I thought so at the time. I know now that I was mistaken."

"What did the voice which you supposed to belong to your father say in response to your rapping?"

"He said: 'It is all right, Cynthia.' I replied: 'What is the trouble?' and to that he answered: 'Nothing at all. Don't disturb us, please. It is just a little misunderstanding; that is all.'"

"And then?"

"I turned away from the door again, and as I did so I was sure that I heard the sound of talking resumed in the library."

"That is an important point. Are you quite positive about that?"

"I was at the time. I think now that I was mistaken. I think I was mistaken in believing that I had heard the sound of my father's voice, and I believe that the sounds which I believed to be the resumption of conversation, was only a clever imitation, made by that man inside the room for the purpose of deceiving me."

"When you turned away, where did you go?"

"I started for the kitchen. I did not go there, however, for the reason that I met Preston in the hall."

"Your errand was to give him some direction about the affairs of the house?"

"Yes."

"And you gave him that direction in the hall, and then returned to your room?"

"I don't remember now that I gave him the direction I had started to do, at all. The fact was that he, too, had heard the sounds of quarreling, and was going toward the dining-room door when I encountered him."

"That reminds me," said the detective. "that I have been informed that your story of this incident and that

told by Preston differs in this particular: That while you said the sound of quarreling came from the library, he has said that they proceeded from the dining-room."

Miss Hampton smiled for the first time. Just the ghost of a smile; and she replied:

"That discrepancy is very easily explained, Mr. Carter. Possibly you have noticed already that there are connecting doors between the library and the dining-room; old-fashioned folding doors."

"Yes."

"They were closed and locked at the time—they are almost always closed and fastened. My father preferred to have them so. Preston was at the rear end of the hall while I was on the stairs near the front of the hall. We heard the same noises, but while I, because of my proximity to them, was able to locate them perfectly, he naturally supposed them to come from the dining-room. Besides, Preston's hearing is not acute. It is, in fact, defective."

"You say that you forgot to give the directions to Preston, which had taken you to him; why was that?"

"Because the first words that he said to me were, in effect, that he had heard the noises, and that he thought that a stranger might be fighting with my father."

"I suppose you assured him that it was all right?"

"Yes."

"What then?"

"I heard the front door open, and turned to see that my brother was entering the house. I remembered that I had some letters that I wished posted, and I called to him and asked him to take them out for me."

"And then——"

"I went upstairs to get the letters. My brother took them and immediately left the house. A few moments later I recalled the fact that I had forgotten my errand to Preston, so I descended to the kitchen, found him there, and sent him to the store for the things I needed."

"So at that moment you regarded yourself as alone in the house, save for the two men who were closeted together in the library?"

"Yes."

"What did you do then?"

"I tiptoed through the hall to the library door and listened; that was probably ten or twelve minutes after I sent Preston out."

"During which time the front hall had been, of course, deserted."

"Yes."

"What did you hear when you listened at the library door?"

"Nothing. Not a sound."

"Well?"

"I listened for some time, and then I called softly to my father. Softly at first, and then louder."

"Did you attempt to open the door?"

"Not just then."

"You mean, I suppose, that you called several times before you did that?"

"Yes."

"And then——"

"Then, receiving no reply, I became frightened, and tried the door. It was not fastened. I opened it and entered—and I discovered the body of my father."

"What did you do then?"

"I don't know what I did at first. I was dazed, I think. Or in a half-faint. I realized dimly what had occurred. I saw that the stranger had disappeared. I remember thinking at the time that he must have made his escape from the house while I was in the kitchen with Preston."

"And what next, Miss Hampton?"

"I think I was in a sort of stupor after that, until Preston returned—or I must have been crazed, and did not know what I did. It is certain that when Preston arrived, I had opened the doors between the library and the dining-room and had dragged the body of my father almost into the latter room. I do not know why I did it, unless because of the huge davenport in the dining-room. It is possible that I had some vague idea of getting the body upon it. There is no couch or lounge of any sort in the library. When Preston came in I was seated upon the davenport sobbing."

"I hope I am not trying you too severely, Miss Hampton, in compelling all these details."

"No, sir." She smiled faintly and then added: "I am stronger than I appear to be."

"Indeed, you are. Can you give me the details of what occurred immediately following upon the return of Preston?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"My presence of mind seemed to return. Preston was for sending for the police at once, but I would not hear of it."

"Why?"

"I don't know—save that I had a horror of having the police in the house."

"But you must have known that they would have to appear some time. A crime had been committed."

"I did not realize it at the time. I knew that my father was dead, hence there was no reason for the presence of a doctor. I knew that he had been killed, and that the police must come, but I did not want them yet. So I made Preston obey me. Together we carried the body to my father's room, and laid it on the bed."

"But did you not realize that that very act made it appear as if you had guilty knowledge of the crime? That you should not have touched the body at all? That you were undertaking a grave responsibility in doing what you did?"

"No. I did not realize it—then. I do now, since I have been accused of the murder, almost. But I did not kill my father, Mr. Carter. You will believe me?"

"Yes. I am quite sure that you did not kill your father, Miss Hampton."

## CHAPTER V.

THE STRANGE STORY CONTINUED.

"Now, Miss Hampton," said the detective, "from the moment when you discovered the body of your father until the return of Preston, and until, with his assistance, you had removed the body to the bedroom, a considerable time must have elapsed. Have you any idea how much?"

"None whatever."

"But you admit that it must have been considerable?"

"Certainly."

"Where was your brother all this time? He had gone out merely to post some letters for you. Had he not returned?"

Cynthia Hampton covered her face with her hands for a moment, and then she lifted it again to the detective, clear-eyed and almost defiant.

"Mr. Carter," she said slowly, "I must confess right here to a weakness which is inexcusable."

"Yes?" he replied tentatively. "What is it?"

"My brother is a young man of extremely nervous temperament. He is devoted to his books, and is not robust like other young men. I think that my primitive thought even when I half-unconsciously began to drag the body into the dining-room was to save my brother from the shock of seeing it, in its dreadful state. I am sure that that was my chief motive when I forced Preston to assist me in carrying it up-stairs. I know that we worked rapidly; I know that I worked feverishly. We had barely placed the body of my father on the bed in his own room when I heard the sound of my brother returning.

"Bidding Preston to be silent, I hastened down the stairs, turned the light low in the hall, and opened the door to meet him. As soon as he appeared I said to him:

"'Father has been badly hurt, Frank. I want you to go to the drug-store for some chloroform liniment. Don't get a doctor. Just get the liniment.'

"'Where is he?' asked my brother; and I pointed toward the library and said:

"'In there. Hasten!'

"He hurried away to do my bidding—he has all his life been accustomed to obeying me without question."

"Well, what more?"

"There is nothing more, save that the nearest drug-store is three long blocks from us, and that by the time Frank returned I had arranged the body of my father on the bed to my satisfaction, and that I again met my brother at the door. In the meantime, I had closed and locked the library and had put the keys in my pocket."

"Wait. What was your idea in doing all these things?"

"To prevent my brother from seeing the body of our father. It was horrible to look upon. I feared the effect of it upon Frank. I was determined that he should not see it if I could prevent it."

"Well?"

"When he did come, I told him that father was dead; that he had been murdered; that the man whom we knew vaguely as Judd van Epps had done the deed; that father's body was in the library still, and that he must promise me that he would make no effort to see it until I gave him permission—*and then I collapsed*."

"And after that——"

"I fainted several times, I believe. Frank wished to send for the doctor, but I prohibited it. I went to my own room at last, locking my door, after first beseeching Frank and Preston to keep watch in the front hall during the night. I think I must have swooned entirely, at that time, for I knew no more until the police were in the house. That was toward morning."

"Who sent for the police?"

"Frank."

"But you had ordered him not to do so."

"Yes; and I had given Preston directions not to have it done till morning."

"Do you know what time it was when the police arrived at the house?"

"It was after three."

"What time was the crime committed?"

"I think about nine o'clock. I am not sure as to that."

"What time was it when your brother returned from the drug-store with the liniment?"

"After ten; probably half-past ten."

"And it was soon after that when you collapsed?"

"Yes."

"Shall we say at eleven?"

"Yes. I have no definite idea as to that."

"So that from soon after eleven o'clock until after three in the morning you were in a swoon, or practically so, on your bed in your own room? Is that what I am to understand?"

"Yes; that is it," replied Miss Hampton, nodding her head emphatically.

"You had not undressed?"

"No."

"Nor changed any of your clothing?"

"No."

"You had revived when the police came? You knew when they arrived?"

"Yes."

"Were you listening for them?"

"I heard them when they came."

"Did you know that it was the police?"

"Yes. I was ready for them then."

"Eh? What do you mean by that expression, Miss Hampton?"

She smiled wanly into his face, and replied with deliberation.

"I mean," she said, "that the swoon must somehow have rested me and restored me to a normal condition of mind. I was able to see things clearly. I was no longer confused. I was prepared to meet any one who might appear."

"I think I understand you," said Nick quietly. "Perhaps better than you think."

She looked at him quickly, and Nick thought that there was one instantaneous flash of fright in her eyes; but it disappeared as quickly as it came; so quickly that it was impossible to be sure that it was there at all.

"Did the officers make any search of the house?" asked the detective.

"No; there was no need. The murderer had already made his escape."

"There seems to be no doubt of that. Was it then—when the police first appeared here—that you were placed under arrest?"

"No; that did not occur until late in the afternoon."

"How does it happen that you were admitted to bail, Miss Hampton? Persons charged with even attempted murder are not often released again; at least, until their innocence is made evident."

"Possibly it was the influence of Mr. Barnes," she replied. "I think I heard the representative from the district attorney's office say that it would be as well if I were released. He said that I could not escape, and I replied that I should not try to do so, as there was no reason why I should."

"Why was Preston detained when you were set at liberty?"

"I think, Mr. Carter, that he was held only as a witness. There was no direct charge against him that I heard."

"How old is Preston?"

"He is past fifty."

"He has been in your family for a long time, hasn't he?"

"Since long before I was born."

"He is devoted to you?"

"Quite. We are a Southern family."

"Was he also devoted to your father?"

"Yes, sir."

"When you went up to your room, at the time you fell into the swoon, did Preston remain below with your brother?"

"Yes."

"By your direction?"

"Yes."

"I understood you to say that you requested them both to keep watch in the front hall, or near it."

"Yes."

"Why did you do that?"

"I don't know. There was no definite reason in my mind, probably. My anxiety at that moment was chiefly on account of my brother. I have already told you——"

"Yes. I remember what you said on that point. You feared that your brother might force his way into the library, where he was led to suppose the body of your father still was, and not finding it there, might search for it. You were not ready for him to see it."

"No; I could not bear the thought of his seeing it."

"And yet you had already done all that you could at the time, in making the body more presentable, had you not?"

"Oh, I suppose so," she replied wearily. "Really, Mr. Carter, I cannot understand why you recur to those questions so frequently. I suppose I was distraught: that I was not really in my right mind. I certainly acted without system, and—you will say—without judgment."

"Still, I think that you have a wonderfully clear head, Miss Hampton."

"I have. I don't think that I ever quite lost it before."

"Miss Hampton, let us turn to another aspect of the case."

"Yes."

"What is your idea about the deficiency in your father's accounts?"

"I have none. It is a great surprise to me. A great shock; almost as great as his sudden death."

"Has he used more money lately than usual?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

"Have you known him to be possessed of a large amount of money at any time within the past year?"

"I have not, Mr. Carter."

"Miss Hampton, have you always believed your father to be a strictly honest man?"

"Mr. Carter, he is dead. I do not——"

"Speak, then, as if he were not dead—and answer my question, if you will."

"I certainly could never believe anything else of my father."

"Who was—or is—this Judd van Epps?"

"I know nothing at all about him, Mr. Carter."

"How, then, does it happen that you are possessed of his portrait?"

She turned a pair of surprised eyes toward the detective, as she replied with deliberate slowness:

"Surely, you do not mean that, Mr. Carter. I have never had a picture of Mr. Van Epps! I have never seen one to my knowledge."

"Your brother told me at my house this afternoon that you had a photograph of Van Epps."

"My brother is mistaken. I don't think he is quite

accountable for all that he may have said to you to-day. He was in a very nervous state. He did wrong in going to you at all. I should not have permitted it had I known."

For a moment the detective was silent, and then clearly and slowly—for he had a distinct object in view—he said:

"Miss Hampton, from your own statement of this case, one might be excused for supposing that it was your brother Frank who committed this crime, and that now your whole aim in life is to stand between him and the consequences of his act. What have you to say to that?"

## CHAPTER VI.

### A CASE OF MANY COMPLICATIONS.

For a moment Cynthia Hampton regarded the detective with wide eyes in which amazement and terror were strangely combined. It was almost the first time when he had succeeded in bringing any definite expression to her features.

But they relaxed slowly, and she left her chair, and with a dignity that was all her own she replied to him:

"I have this to say, Mr. Carter. If you express such sentiments as that, our interview is at an end at once, no matter what the consequences may be. My brother is incapable of a crime as——"

"I quite believe that," Nick interrupted her. "It did not intend to lead you to suppose that the opinion was my own; but that your manner throughout has been such as to suggest that you are shielding somebody."

She shook her head, remaining where she stood, as if in doubt whether to terminate the interview or to permit it to continue; and Nick went on:

"It would be the opinion of nine men out of ten who listened to you as you have talked to me that you are shielding some one. If so, who could it be if not your brother? It would scarcely be Preston. If he had committed the murder——"

"He did not."

"And Frank certainly did not do it."

"No." She resumed her chair.

"You did not do it." This was not a question, but a statement.

"No. I did not do it."

"Who did it, then? Would you shield this Judd van Epps, whom you say you did not know?"

"I certainly would never have turned over my hand for him," she replied; and there was no mistaking the sincerity of her tone this time.

"What were the relations between Judd van Epps and your father?"

"I do not know."

"Pardon me, Miss Hampton, but are you quite sure that you are speaking the whole truth in that reply?"

She hesitated for an instant, and then replied:

"Possibly not the whole truth from your standpoint. It is the whole truth from my own. I know nothing of their relations, save that they were unpleasant always. The reasons for that unpleantness is not a fit subject for me to discuss with you."

"Pardon me again, but all subjects are fit ones where they lead to the right goal. I gather from your remark that there is or has been a woman in the case somewhere. Will you tell me if that is true?"

"No. I will say no more on the subject, at all."

"Even to protect yourself from the possibility—nay, the probability of being tried for your life for the murder of your own father?"

"Not even for that reason."

The detective left his chair and crossed the room toward the door.

"I will not harass you any further, Miss Hampton," he said. "I will say to you that I believe you, your brother, and your colored servant to be entirely innocent of this crime, or of complicity in the commission of it. That statement may possibly atone for some of the harshness in many of my questions. But I will question you no more at present. If there should be others to ask, I will refer to them at some future time. Just now I perceive that you have almost reached the limit of endurance. May I ask you to sit here till I return?"

"Where are you going?"

"I wish to look into the library again. Then into the dining-room and the front hall. I will not trouble you to accompany me. Indeed, I should prefer that you wait for me here."

"Very well," she said, and sank back against the chair in which she was seated.

The detective turned and left the room swiftly, but he did not go to the library, nor to the dining-room.

He did go to the front hall, but he passed swiftly through it and thence up the stairs, three steps at a time. He was determined to see the interior of those rooms on the second floor if only for the briefest of surveys, and he hoped that Cynthia Hampton would remain in the small sitting-room on the ground floor until he had an opportunity to do so.

The instant he reached the landing at the top of the stairs, a glance told him that there were five rooms which opened off from that hall.

He passed quickly through the doorway nearest to the top of the stairs; but a glance informed him at once that it was Frank Hampton's room, and he stepped out of it again.

He turned then to the room at the front of the building, but here the door was closed and locked against him

—and for that very reason he was all the more determined to see the inside of it.

With his picklock he was no time at all in opening the door, and the moment he stepped inside he knew it to have been the sleeping-room of Peter Hampton.

He devoted a swift glance at the bed, and under it; he opened the drawers of the bureau, one after another, rapidly, and closed them almost as soon as he had peered inside; he looked into a closet, half-filled with clothing, and rapidly felt of each article of wearing apparel that hung there; he took down two hats and looked inside of them, and then replaced them.

He opened a hamper into which some soiled linen had been thrust, and, removing the pieces that were there, dropped them back again one by one, examining each one as he did so; but apparently with only a cursory glance.

There were six pairs of shoes there, arranged along the wall, and he looked at these, also, devoting not more than a few seconds to the examination of each pair; and then he hurried from the room into the hall, again closing and locking the door after him.

Another swift glance around him convinced him that the rear room on the same floor was Miss Hampton's own special apartment, and he hurried to that door.

Here again the door was locked, but, as before, he opened it quickly and passed inside—and closed and locked it after him.

Here his method of procedure was the same as in the front room.

He went through the drawers of the bureau rapidly; he peered into the two closets it contained; he studied the rug on the floor near the couch, and he looked behind the pillows of the bed.

But he handled nothing at all; and as swiftly and as deftly as he had entered the room, he left it—and he succeeded in locking the door and stepping aside just as he discovered that Miss Hampton was passing through the lower hall and doubtless intended to ascend the stairs.

The door of Frank's room still stood ajar, and Nick stepped inside and then behind it, and waited.

He could hear Cynthia as she slowly ascended the stairs, and through the crack of the door he could see her when her head raised above the level of the second floor; and when he saw her he nearly betrayed himself in the astonishment he felt at the change a few minutes had wrought in her appearance.

Her face, placid and serene when he left her, was now drawn and haggard. Her attitude, then filled with gentle dignity, was now forlorn in the extreme, and she staggered as she walked. Her manner, then calmness itself, was now agitated. It was like the ghost of the woman he had parted from in the sitting-room not ten minutes ago.

As she reached the top of the stairs, he drew back out of sight; but he could see her, nevertheless, as she fluttered rather than walked to the door of the front room and turned the handle.

He could hear her, too, when she breathed a sigh of relief upon finding that it was locked; but, as if not satisfied with that, she took a key from the little bag she carried and opened the door.

She did not enter the room, however. A glance inside seemed to satisfy her, for she closed and locked it again, and turned away.

Now, as she returned through the hall, she paused at the door of Frank's room, and Nick thought she was about to enter; but, if she had intended to do so, she changed her mind, for after an instant she passed on again to the door of her own room.

Here again, as if she did not know that the door was locked, she tried the handle of it; and again she sighed with relief to find it fastened.

As before, she produced a key, opened the door and went inside, and then Nick hastened from his hiding-place to the stairs.

He had reached the top of them and was on the second step, descending, when he was conscious that she was returning and that there was no escape from discovery; so he turned quickly around, facing up the stairs, and thus stood facing her when she appeared at the door.

For an instant—one instant only—she looked at him with an expression of terror on her face; and then slowly that mask that she had worn all the time she had been in his presence spread over her features; and this in its turn gave place to anger, and she exclaimed:

"How dare you, sir? How dare you search through this house without my permission?"

"Pardon me, Miss Hampton," he replied coolly. "I know that there are two servants at the rear of the house somewhere, but I did not know just how to summon them. I wished to say to you that I desire to look at the body again. I wanted to ask you if you cared to be present while I do so."

"You cannot go into that room again, Mr. Carter!" she exclaimed, with some show of feeling. "You did it before without my permission; why do you insist upon repeating the offense?"

"But why is it an offense, Miss Hampton? Surely you know that I am working in your interests."

"My interests need no worker, and I would thank you to leave my affairs alone."

"And let the authorities send you to the 'chair,' or to prison, at least, for a crime that you had no hand in committing?"

"Even so."

"Such are not my instructions from Mr. Barnes."

"Mr. Barnes has no authority to give instructions in my behalf, sir."

"Possibly not; but would you not prefer to have me enter that room and possibly others, also, with your per-

mission, than to have detectives from the central office come here and ride rough-shod over everything? I assure you, they will do so unless you give me the permission I ask."

"Do you mean that you would send them? They have been here already, and they have not believed it important to make all these useless investigations."

"They were not interested in saving you from yourself, Miss Hampton; I am," replied Nick, ignoring the first part of her remark; but she repeated it.

"Do you mean that you would send them here again?" she demanded.

"I mean that they will come whether I send them or not, unless the report that I have to make renders it unnecessary."

"Very well," she said, and she closed and locked her door and approached him.

"Before we descend the stairs will you let me look into the room where you placed the body of your father on the bed, when you and Preston carried it up-stairs?" asked Nick.

There was one instant of faltering hesitation, and then without a word she turned and led the way to the front room, already entered and examined by the detective; but he did not wish her to know that.

She unlocked the door and pushed it open in front of her.

"That is the room," she said coldly; and Nick, without crossing the threshold, peered inside. Then stepping back he said:

"Thank you. I can now truthfully say that I have looked into the room, can I not?"

An expression that had in it something of gratitude came into her eyes for an instant; but with just a suggestion of irony she asked:

"Would you like to look into the other rooms as well, sir?"

"No," replied Nick. "Thank you. I wish now only to look inside the casket once more, but I think, perhaps, you should wait outside the room for me."

"No," she said. "I prefer to go with you."

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## CHAPTER VII.

### A NEGRO'S STUBBORN LOYALTY.

This was not at all what the detective wished, but there seemed to be no way to avoid her being present at the examination he wished to make.

But as if fate had all along intended to intervene to assist the detective in the complex case, Frank Hampton came through the front door into the house just as they reached the bottom of the stairs.

"I have been waiting outside for you, Mr. Carter," he said. "Are you coming presently?"

"Yes," replied Nick. "Just now I am going to take one more look at your dead father."

"Ah!" breathed the young man. "I will go with you."

"You shall do nothing of the sort," said his sister sharply. "You will remain where you are and wait for us until we return."

"I sha'n't!" remonstrated Frank. "You have always refused to let me see him. I don't see why. I suppose I will be shocked, but all the same——"

"You cannot see him," insisted the sister, with decision. "Tell him, Mr. Carter, that he must not come."

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"It scarcely seems to be a point where I can exercise authority," he said. "I would suggest that you remain here together and wait for me. I will return in five minutes."

For an instant Cynthia looked at him doubtfully, and then with evident reluctance she put the key to the room into the detective's hand.

"Go," she said. "Please make haste."

It was ten minutes, possibly, before the detective returned, and when he did so, he returned the key to Miss Hampton, with the remark:

"Thank you, Miss Hampton. I will go now."

"Wait," she said; and she drew him to one side, out of her brother's hearing.

"What was it you wished to see in that room just now?" she asked.

"The corpse," he replied laconically.

"But why? Why did you wish to see it again? Please tell me?"

"I wished, for one thing, to satisfy myself regarding the instruments of death. I know that the police found a blood-stained ebony cane that had belonged to your father, but it occurred to me that possibly two instruments had been used, and that one of them had not been found. I think I was right about that now. However, it is unimportant."

It was an evasive reply, and Nick intended that it should be so; he also intended that she should recognize it as such; and he did not intend to give her an opportunity to ask any more questions.

"I must go," he said; and he hastened down the steps into the street before he could be held up again.

Frank Hampton called to him, but he called back: "Come to see me in the morning, Frank, if you wish," and hurried on until he had turned a corner of the street and was lost to their view.

At the first opportunity he made use of a public telephone, and called up Alexander Barnes.

"Mr. Barnes," he said, as soon as he had that gentleman at the other end of the wire, "I have just left the house of our friends who are in trouble; you understand?"

"Yes."

"I am going now to headquarters to have a short talk with Preston, and I wish, if it will be convenient for you to do so, that you would remain at your home until I can get there. I have something of grave importance to tell you, and some questions of grave importance to ask you, also. Will you wait for me?"

"Yes. You will not be very long?"

"An hour; possibly two hours; not more than that."

"All right. I will wait."

At headquarters, Nick had Preston taken to a room where he could converse with him undisturbed, and he went at the subject in his usual fashion.

"Preston," he said, "I am not a public detective, strictly speaking. I am a detective. Mr. Barnes, of the Almquist Bank, has asked me to interest myself in your case—in the entire matter, in fact. I want to ask you some questions, and I wish you to tell me the truth."

The negro remained silent and with a face like a sphinx.

"Did you hear the sound of the quarrel before this murder was committed?" asked Nick, perceiving that Preston was going to be a hard man from whom to glean any information that he did not wish to give.

"Yes, suh," was the reply.

"Were you with Miss Hampton when she discovered the body of the murdered man?"

"No, suh. I was out of the house at the time."

"She had sent you out, had she not?"

"Yes, suh."

"For what?"

"I done clean forgot what it was. Something at the store, sir."

"The grocery, or the market?"

"I reckon it was both, sir."

"Where was Miss Hampton when you returned to the house? Where did you find her?"

"In the dinin'-room, suh; on the davenport in there, suh."

"And where was the body?"

"The body! Oh, yes, suh. That was in—well, suh, I reckon it was mostly in both rooms at once. In de library and in de dinin'-room at the same time. Jest lyin' across the sill of de do', suh."

He spoke with a strange mixture of very fair English, frequently lapsing for a word or two into the dialect of his childhood.

"Those doors between the library and the dining-room are usually kept locked, aren't they, Preston?"

"I spec's they is, suh. I dunno. But they wasn't locked that time, for sure."

"What time? At the time of the murder?"

"Yes, suh."

"How do you know they were not locked that time, Preston?"

"Because I done heard that quarrel way back near the end of the hall. The sound of it came to me from through the dining-room, and if them doors had been locked I couldn't have heard it so well, could I? That was what was the matter with what I said about it that makes the policemen keep me here. I said the quarrel was in the dinin'-room and Miss Cinthy she said it was in the library; and there you is, suh."

"Preston, *who is the dead man?*"

"Who—who is what, suh?"

"Who is the dead man?"

"Why, de Lord bless you, suh, don't you know that? It Mr. Peter; Mr. Hampton. My master. I s'pose'd you knew that."

"Look here, Preston, you are a good nigger, I take it, and you loved your master, didn't you, Preston?"

"I shore did, suh."

"And you know now, don't you, that your master is not dead?"

"Not daid, suh? What——"

"And that the dead man who now lies in the casket at that house is Judd van Epps?"

"By golly, suh, I sure does wish it was!"

"And that Mr. Hampton killed him."

"Fore de Lord, suh, I don't know what you is talkin' about."

"And that your master helped you to carry that dead body up the stairs to the second floor and lay it on your master's bed? And that you helped Mr. Hampton to dress the body in a suit of his own clothes? And that you helped him to shave the dead man? I say that you helped him, because you were so nervous and frightened that you could do but little? You remember all that, don't you?"

"You shore is dreamin', suh. I never heard uh such goin's on in all my life, suh. Mr. Hampton, he was done killed by that dog of a Judd van Epps, he done escaped by de front do' when nobody was a-lookin'; and Miss Cinthy, she find de body of her father; and I find the body, too, and ber in a swound when I goes back after my errand; and Miss Cinthy and me, we done carried that body of her papa to the second flo'; and Miss Cinthy, she don't want Mr. Frank to know nothin' about it, and she stopped him at the do' when he was comin' back, and then she goes into swound after swound; and she made me sit up with Mr. Frank to keep him from searchin' fo' de body of his father, which he thought was in the library, and to keep him from sendin' fo' de police, which she didn't want into de house nohow before mawnin', and——"

"There. That will no hicely. You have your story learned perfectly, and you propose to be faithful to it. I can see that."

"Yes, suh. Thank you."

"Do you know what fate is likely to be yours. Preston?"

"I dunno, suh. I expect to go to heaven when I die, suh."

"But how would you like to die before your time?"

"I reckon that there don't nobody do that, suh."

"In the electric chair, for instance?"

"I dunno nuffin' about that chair, suh."

"For the murder of"—the detective paused an instant to give his next words sufficient emphasis, and then added—"Judd van Epps?"

The negro was startled for an instant; but he caught himself quickly.

"That couldn't be, suh," he said deliberately, and again using good English. "Judd van Epps is alive."

"Preston, you cannot prove that he is alive. But I can prove that he is dead. I can also prove that you and your master killed him together. That one of you struck him dead, and that the other pounded his face to a jelly with the silver head of that ebony cane."

The expression of the negro's face did not change.

"I don't think you could prove that, suh, for the reason that it isn't so."

"There is even worse than that, Preston. Miss Cynthia will be tried and convicted for assisting you and her father in the commission of this awful crime, and she will be sent to prison for the rest of her life."

"I don't think so, suh."

"You wouldn't like to see her in prison for life, would you?"

"No, suh."

"And you would do a great deal to save her, if you could, wouldn't you?"

"I reckon I would, suh."

"Well, you can save her and you can save yourself at the same time."

"I reckon, suh, that she can save herself, if she needs to do it; but you see, suh, you is all wrong. You ain't right, nohow. That dead man is Peter Hampton. The man who killed him is Judd van Epps, and he done got away. That is all there is about it."

"What was that quarrel about, Preston?"

"I dunno, suh."

"Who is the woman that has been the cause of the trouble between those two men?"

"I dunno nuffin' about it, suh."

"And what is Judd van Epps' other name?"

"I dunno, suh."

"Who was in the habit of tying Mr. Hampton's shoes when he dressed, Preston?"

"I suppose he tied them himself, suh."

"Do you? Well, who tied the shoes that were put on the feet of the dead man when you assisted in dressing him? Tell me that."

"Now, suh, you is dreamin' ag'in. Yo' suttinly is! Yo' suttinly is!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### SOME STARTLING REVELATIONS.

The sphinxlike countenance of the negro was as uncompromising as a stone image, and the detective understood quite plainly that he could hope to gain no further information from him than had already been imparted.

To the detective, that information was really considerable, although it would amount to nothing whatever so far as others were concerned.

For the black had told him nothing—and yet, he had also told him much.

The "much" was, however, only by implication and inference.

Preston had plainly enough indicated that he was acting under orders; that he was telling exactly what he had been ordered to tell; no more and no less.

He had learned his lesson well, and if the detective had guessed the truth, it was plain that Preston was far too loyal a servant to be coerced into admitting it.

Abruptly Nick turned away and rang the bell which called the officer to them who had brought the negro from his cell to the interview.

"Officer," said Nick, "I wish you would tell the inspector for me that this negro should not be allowed to see any person whatever, or to talk with anybody not directly connected with the police. I don't want him to receive or send messages of any sort. Will you attend to that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. You may return him to his cell. Preston, if you should happen to change your mind, and decide that you would like to talk with me on the subjects I have mentioned, you have only to tell this officer, and he will send for me at once. That is all."

A half-hour later the detective entered the house of the banker, Alexander Barnes.

"I told you over the telephone, Mr. Barnes," he said, as soon as they were seated together, "that I had some important information to give you, and also a few important questions to ask you. I think that I will ask the questions before I give the information, if you don't mind."

"As you please, Carter."

"Very well, then. First tell me if you have ever heard or known anything about the man whose name in this case appears to be Judd van Epps?"

"No. The name is new to me."

"Do you know anything about any of the friends or acquaintances of Peter Hampton?"

"Very little, indeed, if anything at all. He was not a man who had friends or who made friends."

"You have a system of espionage connected with your bank, of course?"

"Most certainly. We have our regular secret service

force, whose duty it is to keep us posted concerning the habits of our employees."

"What can you tell me concerning the habits of Hampton?"

"Merely that his habits have never called for our censure. The worst that he did was to attend, sometimes, the meetings of a society of Mystics."

"Eh?" said the detective. "This is something. What do you know about it?"

"Nothing, only that such a society exists—somewhere in 112th Street, I think. Hampton is known to have gone there, but rather infrequently."

"Just what do you mean by infrequently?"

"Sometimes once a week, sometimes twice in a week, and sometimes not at all for a period of two or three weeks."

"And what do you know about the society itself?"

"Nothing at all, save that our men reported it as a gathering of harmless cranks."

"Who is at the head of it?"

"I don't know; but I have something about it here, in my private information-book. Wait, I will get it."

He went into another room, and presently returned with a small book in his hand from which he read:

"'The Society of Vasca.' Here is the number; in East 112th Street. You had better copy it down, Carter."

"I can remember it," said the detective, looking over his shoulder and reading rapidly from the book. "Just let me take that book in my own hands for a moment and read over that entry. Thank you."

There was silence for several moments after that, and then the detective closed the book and returned it to the banker.

"There may be or there may not be the clue that I am looking for in that information," he said, "but it is worth pursuing. It is presided over by a Madame Loyola, I see, and if I am not mistaken I have heard of her somewhere. And I see, also, that there is associated with her a Professor Condor. That name is strangely suggestive of a vulture, is it not?"

"So it would seem."

"This book also tells me that it is only within the last year that Hampton has been attending the meetings of the society."

"Yes."

"And did you not say that it is within a year that the defalcations of Hampton, amounting to about thirty-five thousand dollars, have been going on?"

"Yes."

"That may be a coincidence only—or it may be significant. In what amounts was the money taken, and when were they taken? Have you a memorandum with you?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me, please."

"There were three distinct thefts—safely made by him because by reason of his position in the bank he could cover them nicely; and I ought to say that he could have taken ten times as much without our being the wiser."

"Never mind that, nor how they were concealed. What were the amounts and when were they stolen from the bank?"

"The first one was five thousand; taken from the bank September 15th, a year ago."

"Humph! Just a week to a day after his first visit to the society of Vasca is reported by your secret service, and on the very day of his second visit there. Now the second stealing, if you please?"

"The 10th of December following."

"Let me glance at that book again. Yes; he visited the society on the evening of that day. What was the amount that time?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Now the third theft, and the last one, as I understand you?"

"Twenty thousand dollars; taken the day of the murder."

"There is something more than mere coincidence in all this, Mr. Barnes; don't you think so?"

"I do. Yes."

"You had not noticed it before?"

"No; certainly not."

"I think that we may look for the clue to all this mystery in the house in 112th Street, Mr. Barnes."

"It certainly does look that way."

"Now I will touch upon another point."

"Yes?"

"Hampton was with you, approximately, twenty-eight years?"

"Yes."

"So, at the time he began in your employ, Cynthia was about two years old, and Frank was born about eight years later."

"Yes."

"Did you ever see the mother of those children?"

"Yes. Once or twice at the bank; but that was many years ago."

"What became of her? Did she die?"

"I think not. It is my recollection that she left him, or he got rid of her. I am sure that there was domestic trouble of some kind."

"Did you ever hear her given name?"

"Yes. Jeannette."

"Do you remember how she looked?"

"Not at all, save that she was very pretty. Dark, I think. Something on the gipsy pattern."

"That isn't a bad description. Do you remember about the time that this domestic difficulty occurred?"

"No; only that the son was still a child; possibly three or four years old. Possibly even younger than that."

"And you have never heard what became of the woman?"

"Not a word. Hampton was close-mouthed, you know."

"Do you remember if there was another man mixed up in the case at the time?"

"I do not; but I always supposed there was. There usually is, isn't there?"

"That is at least the popular belief. Now, I think I have asked you all the questions I care to put at the present moment. I will give you the information I spoke of."

"I am all impatience to hear it."

"I told you at the house that the dead man in the coffin was not, and never had been, your cashier, didn't I?"

"You certainly did."

"I suspected at the time that you knew it was not, Mr. Barnes. Don't get indignant. I could not understand how you could help seeing what I saw. The clothing did not fit the man in the coffin. There was altogether too much method in the way the face had been battered up. The only articles of wearing-apparel worn by the dead man that fitted him—so far as we could see—were the shoes, *and those shoes are almost two sizes larger than the shoes which Hampton habitually wore.*"

"Great Heaven! Are you sure of that?"

"Positive."

"What does it all mean, Carter?"

"It means that when that quarrel took place in the library, it was Hampton who killed his guest, and not the guest who killed Hampton. It means that when Cynthia went to the door of the library and rapped for admittance, it *was* her father's voice that replied to her, and he told her to send Frank and Preston out of the house and then come to him.

"It means that as soon as they had both gone her father came out of the library and told her that he had killed Van Epps, and that he must escape, and that together they conceived the idea of dressing the dead man in Hampton's clothes and in making it appear that it was Hampton who was killed.

"The two men were about of the same size. Both were bald. Both had a fringe of iron-gray hair around the base of the skull, and already Hampton had battered in the face of the dead man so that it was unrecognizable—but he battered it some more, to make sure.

"It means that Preston returned to the house in the midst of this scene, and was taken into the confidence of the conspirators; that he helped Hampton to carry the body up the stairs—for Cynthia could no more have done it than a child. She has not the physical strength, no matter what her moral courage may amount to."

"I think you are right. I had not thought of that."

"Then, while Hampton and Preston were working over the dead man, getting him into a suit of Hampton's clothing, Cynthia met Frank at the door and sent him away again until they should have finished; and when the boy came back from that errand she pretended to go into hysterics and swoons—pretended also that the body was still in the library, and finally set him to watch in the lower hall with Preston, while she pretended to go to her room. But in reality, Mr. Barnes, she returned to her father, who was still in the house, and assisted him in putting the finishing touches to the dressing of the corpse.

"They were stumped, however, when it came to the shoes, and they had to replace Van Epps' shoes on his own dead feet. *They did that, but they put the right shoe on the left foot and the left shoe on the right foot—and both shoes were tied with what is called a 'hard knot.'*"

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE DETECTIVE'S SILENT LAUGHTER.

"I haven't finished yet," continued the detective. "Frank Hampton told me a strange story about having seen his father's ghost that night. He said that he was awakened out of a sleep and discovered his father in the act of shaving. He also said that Hampton was a man who could shave while walking around a room; that he rarely needed a mirror at all."

"I have heard of men who could do that," said the banker, "and, now that you mention it, I think I have heard Hampton say that he could do it, and did it frequently; but what has all that to do with this affair?"

"This: Frank Hampton is not the boy to sit quietly on watch in the lower hall from half-past ten till three in the morning, particularly after such a shock as he had experienced. He is too nervous, and he was too much unstrung at that time."

"I agree with you there."

"So—don't you see? Preston persuaded him to take something to drink, and it put him to sleep in his chair,

doubtless, or possibly he was persuaded to lie down on the davenport in the dining-room. Mr. Barnes, I found in the top drawer of the sideboard in the dining-room an open razor, with dried lather and some particles of hair upon the blade. Do you see the deduction?"

"Not quite. What is it?"

"Peter Hampton had dressed himself in Van Epps' clothes. Habit made him think that he was not dressed unless he shaved, and, besides, he was not sure when he would have another opportunity. He got out his cup, brush, and razor, and began the operation, but he was far too nervous to keep still, so he went from place to place while he was doing it. He even wandered into the dining-room, having been told that Frank was sleeping. Possibly he wished to use the mirror to put the finishing touches on his shaving."

The banker nodded.

"He discovered that he had roused his son just as he finished shaving, and he dropped the razor into that dresser—and forgot to tell Cynthia about it afterward. He tiptoed out of the room, but he had roused Frank, and it was then that the young man insisted upon sending for the police. The telephone is in the dining-room, and he had probably sent the message before Preston could prevent it. There is where your ghost comes in."

The banker nodded again.

"I managed to make a quick examination of the rooms on the second floor of that house," continued the detective. "I found that while some of the drawers of the bureau in Peter Hampton's own room were models of method, others were in utter confusion. In other words, I discovered every evidence there that articles of wearing-apparel—collars, cuffs, underclothing, etc.—had been hastily seized; so hastily that the others were left in confusion, while all else in that bureau was in perfect order. I found a pair of shoes in the closet that had unmistakable stains of blood on their soles—the shoes he wore when the crime was committed. I found a pair of trousers hanging in that same closet that had a stain of blood upon them, as if a man had inadvertently wiped that stain from his fingers and had forgotten. I found in that closet a hat that is two sizes larger than the three others that were with it, *but which is exactly the size of the head of the dead man.*"

"Good heavens, Carter! It would seem to be——"

"Wait. I found, near the bottom of a hamper of soiled clothing, a collar and a pair of cuffs, both bearing stains of blood; stains that were rubbed in, as if they had been half-dried upon the fingers when the linen was hastily removed from the neck and wrists of the wearer."

"That would be sufficient."

"But it is not all. I went into Cynthia's room, also."

"Well?"

"I found only one thing there of importance; it was the shaving-cup and brush of Peter Hampton. It was safely stowed away in one of the drawers of the bureau. It is a small thing in itself, but it shows that Hampton began his shaving in his daughter's room, although he finished it in the dining-room."

"All this makes Cynthia Hampton an accessory to the murder, doesn't it?"

"Yes, *after* the fact, and in defense of her father. I think a court would be very lenient with her under the circumstances. However, that is no part of our affair. She has made her bed, and she must lie upon it. Our business is to find the man who stole from your bank, and who afterward killed another man, whether in self-defense or not we do not know."

"So Hampton is alive, after all," murmured the banker.

"Yes."

"And it is an unknown man who was killed."

"Mr. Barnes," said the detective coolly, "I think that the dead man was once known by the name of Judd van Epps, which is probably his real name, but I believe, since I came here and talked with you, that he has since been known as Professor Condor."

"What! Of that society of mystics?"

"Yes; and if I have any knowledge at all of human nature, I think we will discover that the woman who is now known as Madame Loyola was once Mrs. Hampton, and that she is at the bottom of this entire matter."

The banker uttered a long, low whistle. Then he said:

"Carter, you go altogether too fast for me."

"Possibly, but you have not followed me all through my inquiries, nor have I had time to tell you everything."

"I suppose not."

"When I asked Cynthia the cause of the quarrel, she was as mum as an oyster, but she admitted that she did not consider the subject a proper one for her to discuss with me. Hence, she knows of a woman in the case—possibly knows that it is her mother.

"When I asked Preston the same question, he was just as uncommunicative, although there is not a particle of doubt that he knows all about the cause of the quarrel;

hence, the woman in the case, who was once his master's wife—his mistress."

"It is a strangely involved affair, Carter."

"It is."

"And you believe that Hampton escaped from the house in the clothing of the man he killed?"

"Yes; in order that that clothing might not be left there to implicate him later. But there were two articles that he was forced to leave behind him. The shoes, because there were no others that would fit the dead man; and the hat, which is so large that it would have dropped down over the head of Hampton."

"And where do you suppose he is now?"

"Ah! That is another matter. If I were in his place, I know where I would be."

"Where?"

"At that house in East 112th Street."

"What!"

"Certainly."

"Why?"

"Because, under the circumstances, it would be the very safest place in the world for him to hide; at least, he would naturally so regard it."

"How so?"

"First, because if that professor and Judd van Epps are one and the same—or have been—he has not been known as Judd van Epps since a long time ago, but has gone under the name of Professor Condor, and therefore it is doubtful if anybody at the 112th Street house knows that Judd van Epps has ever lived there. Second, if the woman is at the bottom of this, and is some sort of an accomplice in this crime, she would take Hampton in, and represent to all that the professor was at home, but ill, or something of that sort."

"You intend to visit that house, of course?"

"Certainly."

"When?"

"In the morning."

"Why not now?"

"Because I am not certain of my premises."

"I would like to go with you, when you do go, Carter."

"That would hardly be the thing to do."

"Why not?"

"Because your presence would put them at once on their guard. I don't want that."

"What is to become of that poor girl, Carter?"

"The 'poor girl' seems to be abundantly able to take care of herself in any emergency. I have never in all my experience as a detective come in contact with a stronger will, with more perfect self-control, with such steellike nerves in the face of an emergency, and with such calm and placid resistance. If that 'poor girl' had been a man and a politician, she would have become a second Richelieu."

"And the boy?"

"The boy will be much better if left to his own resources, with a little outside help such as you can offer. But I think we are going rather too far. I do not regard this as a deliberate murder."

"No?"

"No. I think that Hampton fled in a panic after the deed was done. He knew that he was a defaulter, and that he would be discovered if he was not at the bank in person to defend himself."

"Anyhow, there is no doubt, is there, that Cynthia—and Preston also—will have to go to prison as accessories after the fact?"

"None whatever. And now, Mr. Barnes, I am going to say good night."

"You will let me hear from you early in the day tomorrow?"

"Assuredly."

When the detective descended the steps of the banker's house to the street he did not go very far away before he came to a stop and waited calmly in the depths of a convenient shadow, watching the banker's house.

After almost half an hour the door opened slowly, and the banker appeared.

He had donned a slouch-hat and a long coat, so that he looked quite different from his usually carefully groomed person.

For a moment he paused at the top of the steps, glancing up and down the street furtively, and the detective, watching him, smiled.

"I thought so," he said to himself. "I know where you are going, Mr. Barnes, so I need not trouble to follow you. I will arrive there before you do;" and he turned and hurried swiftly away.

A little later he concealed himself once again in a shadow, but this time he stood in the street directly opposite the house where the murder had been committed, and where Cynthia Hampton had made such a brave fight for her undeserving father.

It was not long before Barnes appeared, and he walked rapidly to the door and rang the bell.

He had to ring several times before he received a response to his summons, for the time was now close to midnight; but the door was opened at last, and Cynthia herself appeared in the aperture.

The detective saw her start; he even heard her utter a low cry of surprise; and then he laughed softly to himself when the young woman stepped outside the door and closed it after her.

Nick waited long enough to see that the two were talking earnestly together, and then he glided away and left them.

"Good!" he said to himself. "It is as it should be. But all the same I think I will make it a point to know where she goes."

And when, a little later, he arrived at his own home, he called Patsy to him and said:

"Patsy, put some money in your pocket and then go to the house of the Hampton murder. After a little while, Miss Hampton and her brother will come out. Follow them wherever they go, and report to me when they are safely settled."

## CHAPTER X.

### THE HOUSE IN 112TH STREET.

The detective's first move the next morning after he had finished his breakfast was to go again to police headquarters and have Preston brought before him.

"Preston," he said sternly, "I have come here to give you one more chance."

"Yessuh. Thank you, suh," was the calm reply.

"I know the whole game now, Preston, from beginning to end, and I will tell you plainly that I think you are only guilty of too great loyalty to your employers. You are guilty of this crime only as an accessory after the fact, but that will none the less send you to prison—and for a considerable term."

"I hope you hasn't gone to dreamin' things again, suh," was Preston's reply.

"If you will tell me the whole story, Preston, you will not need to go to prison. If you do not tell it, you most certainly will go there."

"I have told you all I know, suh."

"Listen to me. Let me prove to you that I know whereof I speak."

"Yessuh."

"Years ago your mistress left her husband to attach herself to a society which called itself the Mystic Society of Vasca. The man who at that time was at the head of the society was Judd van Epps, although he was known there only as Professor Condor, and it was this same Professor Condor who went to Hampton's home the other night and was murdered while he was there. Is that true?"

"I dunno nuffin' about it, suh."

"You won't talk?"

"I dunno nuffin' to talk about, suh."

"When you dressed the corpse in Hampton's clothes, you found that Hampton's shoes would not fit him, so you put his own on his feet again. Then, when Hampton started to leave the house, he found that he could not wear the professor's hat without being lost in it, so he left it behind him. Will you talk now?"

"I dunno nuffin' to talk about, suh."

"You are the most obstinate nigger I ever saw."

"Yessuh. Thank you, suh."

"Your master is now at a house in East 112th Street, where he is pretending to be the professor, and the Madame Loyola who is there is—or was at one time—Mrs. Hampton. I am going there now to arrest Hampton and his former wife."

"You shore have the funniest dreams, suh."

"All right, Preston. Remember, when the judge is sending you to prison, that you might have saved yourself at this moment, if you had cared to do so."

"Yessuh."

Nick Carter came away from headquarters disgusted.

"I have known of obstinate, pig-headed men in my time," he muttered to himself, "but Preston can certainly give them all cards and spades."

He had gone down-town in his automobile, and now he had himself driven in it to the house in 112th Street, for he had determined to delay that call no longer. His mail that morning had brought him a short note from Patsy, which had said briefly:

"Off for the South on the night express. More later. Patsy."

Nick knew, therefore, that the banker had warned Cynthia, that he had succeeded in convincing her that Nick Carter knew the truth, and had persuaded her to escape while there was time; and that is precisely what

Nick had desired him to do when he went to the banker's house and told him the story about the crime.

The detective respected and admired the nerve and strength of the young woman who stood so nobly in defense of her father against all obstacles, and he was resolved that if he could accomplish it she should escape severe punishment for what she had done.

And he had read in the manner of the old bachelor banker more than an ordinary interest in this daughter of his erring cashier—and so he had used him in the way we have seen.

But for once the detective overleaped himself.

He had forgotten that the young woman might still regard her duty to her father as paramount to all other considerations.

It had not occurred to him that she might first go to 112th Street, or send there in order to warn her father of his impending fate. He had not taken that into consideration. And, not having done that, he had neglected to warn Patsy that the house in 112th Street had anything whatever to do with the case in question.

When the automobile whirled up in front of the door at the 112th Street address, the detective got down leisurely and ascended the steps.

In reply to his ring, a young colored servant, who bore a remarkable resemblance to Preston, appeared.

"I wish to see Professor Condor," said the detective, stepping quickly inside the door.

"Who's dat, suh?" asked the young woman.

"Professor Condor."

"Oh, him! Yessur, I knows him, but he don't live here, suh. He ain't live' here fo' mo'rn a hull month. I ain't seen him since, suh."

"Very well," said Nick. "In that case I would like to see Madame Loyola."

"Yessur; yessur; suttinly, suh. Right this way, suh."

She led the way through the hall toward the rear of the house, and presently opened a door into a darkened room.

"Step right in here, suh. De madam'll be down in a minute, suh. Who shall I tell her you is?"

"Just say that it is a gentleman who desires to see her at once."

"Yessuh."

She went out, leaving the detective alone, closing the door after her, and Nick contented himself to await the arrival of madam, still in a suspecting that he was being hoodwinked.

## CHAPTER XI.

### NICK CARTER'S WILY TRICK.

Five minutes passed, while the detective remained quietly waiting; five more, during which he rose, crossed to one of the windows and opened it to admit more light.

But at the end of that time a flood of revelation burst upon him, and he suddenly realized that he had been hoodwinked.

He started quickly to the door, opened it, and stood for a moment, listening.

Not a sound disturbed the stillness of the house, and there was something about that very silence that told him, even before he investigated further, that he was now the only human being within the confines of those four walls.

Nevertheless, he hastened to the front parlor.

It bore every evidence of recent occupancy—but there was no one there.

He ascended the stairs, two or three at a time, to the second floor, and—of what use is it to describe his researches? He very soon convinced himself that not only had the occupants of the house fled, long before he arrived, but that the servant who had admitted him when he came had been left there for that purpose alone, and had walked quietly out of the house and disappeared as soon as he was comfortably seated in that darkened back parlor.

Nick crossed the room in which he happened to be standing at the moment this conclusion came to him, and gazed at his own reflection in the mirror long and silently; then he laughed.

"I have heard of such expressions as 'Hoist by his own petard,' 'Caught in his own trap,' and 'Mangled by his own hound,'" he mused, "but this is about the first time I ever happened to hear of anybody who was duped by his own duplicity."

He had managed so that he would send the banker to warn Cynthia to escape, and in doing that he had given her an opportunity to warn her father, and Peter Hampton had taken such good advantage of the warning that he had not only disappeared utterly, but he had also managed to cover his tracks.

The people who had escaped from the house—Hampton and the woman who had once been his wife, and doubtless was so still—had taken time only to get together a few necessary articles of wearing apparel; otherwise, they had abandoned the house just as they had lived in it.

It was plain that they had departed within the hour after the warning had been received, and it was plain also that they had no intention of returning—ever.

They had been content to leave behind them all their Lares and Penates, all their household possessions, all their furniture, and, in short, everything which could not be carried away in a few trunks.

It is true that Nick went through the house with some care, but it is also true that he discovered absolutely nothing there to indicate in what direction the fugitives had gone, and at last he reentered his automobile and had himself driven to the neighboring station-house of the police, where he reported as much of the circumstance as was necessary.

Then he went home.

He entered his study and seated himself to think the matter over, but suddenly he wheeled in his chair and seized the telephone. In a moment more he was in communication with the inspector in charge at police headquarters, and as soon as he had made himself known he said:

"Inspector, I want you to do me a favor, will you?"

"Certainly, if I can, Nick. What is it?"

"It is now 10.30 by my watch. In just forty minutes from now a negro will call at your office and ask to see Preston. I will be that negro."

"Oh! Well?"

"I want you to have Preston in your office at the time, and to be engaged in giving him a lecture on the evil of his ways, and to end by telling him that he is to be set free, but that he must get out of the city and out of the State at once. Make him think that some influence has been brought to bear to free him, but that if he remains in the State of New York twenty-four hours, or twelve hours, he will be arrested again. You understand?"

"Yes."

"At just about that time I will be announced. You will let Preston go away with me. That is all right."

"All right, Nick. You will bring Preston back to us, of course?"

"Yes, and more with him."

"By the way, Nick. Hello! Wait a minute. Did you know that the Hampton girl jumped her bail last night? That she sent word to the coroner and to the police-station that she was skipping out and going where she could not be found, and that she would leave the dead body, as well as everything else in the house, to be disposed of as we pleased. What do you think of that?"

"Never mind, now, inspector. I'll tell you later. Good-by."

On time to the minute, Nick Carter, disguised as a negro—and he had not undertaken such a disguise in a long time before—appeared in the corridor of the so-called White Building, and, inasmuch as they were prepared for him there, it was not long before he was conducted to the presence of the inspector, and there he found Preston seated in one corner of the room.

But he did not even glance in the direction of the real negro. Instead, he said to the officer:

"There is a man heah, suh, by de name of Preston. I was told that he was to be set free dis mawnin'. Can I done see him, suh?"

"What do you want to see him about?" demanded the inspector harshly.

"Well, suh, if it am true that he is to be set free, I reckon that I'd better tell *him* about that, suh; beggin' yo' pardon, suh."

"Is Preston a friend of yours?"

"No, suh. I never saw him in my life."

"Who sent the message to him?"

"Jes' some friends of his'n, suh."

"White, or black?"

"I reckon both, suh."

"Oh! All right. Get out of here, both of you. That is Preston, behind you. Skip now. If I find either of you in sight of this place in five minutes, I'll lock you both up."

Nick wheeled and stared at the negro for a moment; then he demanded:

"Are you Preston? All right. Yo' jes' come along with me, Mr. Preston."

And as they left the office the inspector called after them:

"And don't you forget, Preston, what I told you about getting away from New York."

Outside the building, on Mulberry Street, Nick said to the negro:

"Mistuh Preston, I was paid well fo' comin' here after you. Now you walk right along wid me and listen to what I'se got to tell yo'. Yo' needn't do no talkin', and then I won't have nothin' to remember about you. See? There was a man come to me, an' he says to me, like this:

"'Pharaoh'—that's my name, Mistuh Preston—'Pha-

raoh, there's a nigger down at police headquarters by the name of Preston. You go to him and yo' tell him that his master sent you; and you tell him that he will soon be free, and that when he is I want him to go to the old place jes' as fast as his old legs can tote him there; and yo' give him dis yere money, and tell him it ain't no good fo' him to go anywhere else. Jes' yo' tell him that master and missus'll meet him there, and he'll understand.'

"Now, Mistuh Preston, I reckon that's all. Here is de money that I was told to give you"—and Nick put a sealed envelope into Preston's hand—"and I wish yo' luck with it. I bid yo' good day, Mistuh Preston."

He turned and started away, and although Preston called after him, he did not stop; and so he left Preston standing in a half-dazed condition at the corner of Bleecker and Mulberry Streets.

Nor did Nick look behind him once, for he knew that Chick was on the opposite side of the street, prepared to follow Preston wherever he should go. There was twenty-five dollars in the envelope he had thrust into the negro's hand, and Nick thought with that much Preston should be able to pay his way to "the old place" if, indeed, there was such a place at all, for the detective had merely guessed at that.

But he hurried home and, as soon as he entered, asked Joseph if there had been a telephone message for him from Chick.

Finding that there had been none, he lost no time in getting out of the negro disguise, and he had just completed his toilet when the expected message came.

"It worked all right," said Chick, over the phone. "Preston acted as if he didn't know what to do for a time, but finally he looked into the envelope, and then, perceiving that you had disappeared, he made tracks for Cortlandt Street. We are at the Pennsylvania station, in Jersey City, now, and Preston has bought a ticket through to Fredericksburg, Virginia. I have taken two tickets for the place, and you have got just an hour and ten minutes before the train leaves."

It was a disappointment, as well as somewhat of a surprise, to the detective that no further communication had been received from Patsy, but he recalled the fact that its instructions to Patsy had been to communicate with him only when Cynthia Hampton should be "settled."

It was just half-past one o'clock that afternoon when the train on the Pennsylvania Railroad pulled out of the station at Jersey City, and among its passengers were, of course, the negro Preston and the two detectives, Nick Carter and his chief assistant, Chick.

Arrived at Washington, Preston merely loitered around the station until it was time for the Fredericksburg train to depart, which was at half-past ten that night, and it was therefore about one o'clock in the morning when they arrived at historical Fredericksburg.

All the city was sleeping, apparently. It is never awake, for that matter, but at that hour in the morning it seemed utterly dead, and as the negro and the two white men were the only passengers who got down at that station, and as Preston instantly started rapidly away through the darkness, it became apparent at once that it was not going to be an easy matter to follow him without his discovering the fact.

He started directly up the main street, and Nick at once guessed that he would cross the long bridge over the Rappahannock, so he said to Chick:

"Directly up this street, about a quarter of a mile, there is a hotel. Around the corner from that hotel, half-way up the street, is a livery. Hurry on ahead, Chick. Wake up that liveryman, get two horses, and some sort of an express, or democrat, wagon, so that we can carry an extra passenger. Leave a deposit for the whole rig with the liveryman. Then drive directly to the bridge, and if you don't pick me up as soon as you think you ought, turn back again and follow this street till you do. Preston will take one of those two ways."

But the detective had guessed correctly.

Preston did cross the bridge, and he did not once look back, either. It was plain that he had not the least idea in the world that he was followed.

But he walked rapidly, and Nick, although some distance behind him, was already half-way across the bridge when Chick came up with him.

After that they drove slowly, permitting the horses to walk in order to keep behind the negro until they were assured which road he would take after crossing the river.

But when that became apparent—when Nick was sure that Preston's course was through King George County, or into it—he started up the horses again, and presently overtook the negro, who seemed to know every inch of the ground perfectly.

"Hello, uncle!" said Nick, pulling up. "Climb in behind, there, if you care to ride. That is if you are going far, uncle."

"Thank you, sir. Yessuh. I'm going about fifteen miles straight down this road, sir. I'll be much obliged, sir, for a lift. I ain't been used to walkin' much, lately, but, sir, it does seem good to smell de ground of ole Virginy once more."

"Have you been away, uncle?"

"Yessuh; a good many years."

"Where shall we let you out? What's the name of the place, uncle?"

"The place is Grantley, sir. It's about five miles off'n this road, but I'll tell you, sir, where to put me down. I'm sure I'm much obliged to you, suh."

## CHAPTER XII.

### AN EXPIATED CRIME.

During that ride the detective asked frequent questions of the unsuspecting negro, adopting for his own use as he did so that slow, Southern drawl which he knew so well how to assume, and which convinced Preston more than anything else could have done that there was no reason why he should not speak freely.

With intermissions and intervals, Nick asked him:

"Who owns Grantley now, uncle?"

"I reckon it b'longs in the same family, suh," replied Preston. "It's a good many years since I was here, so I dunno much about de place now, but I reckon there's been Hamptons 'round there, mo' or less, always."

"You are old enough to have been a slave, aren't you, uncle?"

"Yessuh; when I was no higher'n yo' knee."

"And who did you belong to?"

"Alexander Hampton was the old master, suh; but I went away from here with Mr. Peter, suh, after the war. I've been with him ever since, suh."

"Oh, you have, eh? And where is he now? Has he come back here to live?"

"I don't rightly know, suh, but I spec's he has. But I ain't sure 'bout that, suh. I only got word to come here and that I would find him, and so when de train got in at Fredericksburg I couldn't wait till mawnin'. I jest lit out to walk it, suh."

It was half-past three in the morning when they let Preston out of the rear of the wagon and saw him start away along a fork of the road toward Grantley, and he was very grateful to those for the lift they had given him along the road.

Nick knew that two miles farther along the road they were traveling he would find a place where they could get their breakfast, and so they bade Preston good-by and drove on.

Virginians are not early risers, and they experienced some difficulty in rousing the people at the small roadside hotel, but they succeeded at last, and ultimately secured an excellent breakfast for themselves and for the horses.

It was after ten that morning before they started on the return drive to Grantley, but Nick knew now where he was going, and that he would find the man he sought when he got there, so he was in no hurry.

He had made some inquiries about the place, and, in order to make sure of finding it without difficulty, he hired a negro to go with them as guide, and it was therefore soon after eleven o'clock when they turned into the long drive and approached an old mansion, a wreck of former grandeur, which stood at the end of a long, double row of poplars.

As they approached the house he saw that there were evidences of excitement about the place, and he correctly guessed that Preston had only just succeeded in seeing his master, and that the latter, alarmed by the story that Preston had to tell, of the money and the message that had been sent to him, was already preparing for another flitting.

But that flitting was not to be.

The approach of the two detectives along the red roadway was so silently and swiftly made, and the people about the house were so deeply engaged in other matters, that they were not observed until they were almost directly in front of the house, and here a surprising scene presented itself.

Two horses and a carriage were approaching the front porch from the stables, the horses being led by a negro.

On the veranda of the house a group was gathered, and in the foreground of that group was a tall, spare man, whom Nick at once recognized as Peter Hampton.

Before him, on his knees, was Preston, evidently begging his master's pardon for the unwitting betrayal of his hiding-place. Near Hampton, and looking upon the scene with a sneer on her handsome face, was a middle-aged woman, whose hair was still as black as the wing of a raven, and whose beauty had not faded with the flight of years. Behind them, at a little distance, was Cynthia Hampton, calm, serene, unmoved, outwardly so, at least; and beside her was her brother Frank.

Nick Carter and his assistant leaped to the ground and advanced toward the veranda, and it was only at that instant that their presence was discovered.

Preston leaped to his feet with a sharp cry, and pointed with his finger toward the two detectives, and Peter Hampton wheeled like lightning to confront them, at the same time drawing a revolver from one of his pockets. Mrs. Hampton turned upon them with the fury of a cat, and she seemed to search in her bosom for some weapon which was not there. Frank Hampton shrank closer to his sister, who alone stood unmoved, and who turned her calm eyes upon Nick Carter.

"Good morning, Hampton," said Nick. "I am really sorry to be obliged to disturb this little family gathering. You had better put away that gun; you see I have none—in sight."

Hampton leveled the weapon straight at Nick Carter's heart, and he said coldly:

"Stand where you are, Nick Carter, and I won't hurt you. Approach a step nearer, and I will kill you. I know how to shoot, too."

"I haven't a doubt of it, Hampton. I'll stand here for the present—until we agree upon what we are to do. It would do you no sort of good to kill me, you know."

"It might give me some satisfaction," replied Hampton grimly.

"Oh, no, it wouldn't. You have nothing against me. If it had not been for that matter of defalcation at the bank, you would not have fled at all after you killed Van Epps, would you? Eh?"

"No. As God is my judge, I did not mean to kill him. He had pulled a pistol, and I struck him in order to save my own life."

"I do not doubt the truth of that, Hampton. But you should have remained there; you ought to have sent for the police at once, and given yourself up."

"I know it now—when it is too late. It was only that other matter. I knew that if I could not be at the bank myself, my theft would be discovered. It was that which drove me to flight."

"I do not doubt you."

"Stay where you are, Carter! Don't come any nearer to me than you are now until I have said all that I have to say, or I will shoot you."

"I won't. Go on. What have you got to say?"

"This: I have prepared, and I have it in my pocket at this moment, a written confession of everything. Mr. Barnes knows when I parted with my wife, and why we parted. He knows that I never believed her guilty of anything worse than a craze after a set of people who practise in what they call mystics. He knows that I always loved her.

"She stands here at my side now, Mr. Carter. I came suddenly upon her about a year ago, and all my old passion for her revived. It was because I wished to get her away from that terrible set of people that I have done these wrongs.

"I want to tell you right now that Judd van Epps, who was known among them as Pro——"

"Yes. I know that."

"That whatever other powers he might have possessed, I know that he was a hypnotist. People may laugh and sneer, but there were persons over whom he exercised a control as perfect as is my control at this minute over my own voice. My wife was one of these."

He ceased abruptly, was silent for a moment, and then he went on:

"But of what avail is all this talk? It is all in the written statement in my pocket. I have been a methodical man and faithful to my employers, until these thefts occurred, but I have never been a good man. I have never been good to my children, although no man was ever blessed with a more devoted daughter than Cynthia."

"You may well say that, Hampton."

"My life has been a failure, Mr. Carter, because I have made it so. Stand where you are, if you please. I see an inclination in your face to come nearer, but I have not finished yet. I am going to give myself up in a moment, but I wish to finish first."

"Go on, then."

"I want you to promise me that you will do everything in your power to help Cynthia, so that she shall not suffer overmuch for what she has done in my behalf."

"I promise."

"I want you to ask Mr. Barnes to do something for my boy, when I am—in prison."

"I promise."

"I wish also that you would stand Preston's friend, as much as you can."

"I promise that, too."

"And I wish you to believe me when I assure you that Mrs. Hampton has had no hand or part in the crimes I have committed."

"I do not think that anything can be proved against her, Hampton. I shall not try to do so."

"Thank you. There are nineteen thousand dollars in bills in this envelope with the confession that is in my pocket. It is all I can return of the stolen money."

"Very well."

"And now, Mr. Carter, have you your handcuffs ready?"

"Quite so, Hampton."

"Then come and take me. I am ready."

He made as if to reach out his hands; his air was that of one who was resigned to his fate, but as he stretched forth his arms toward the detective he turned the muzzle of his revolver quickly against himself, and before any one there could do a thing to prevent the act, he had pulled the trigger of the double-action weapon with his thumb.

It was all over then. The bullet pierced Peter Hampton's heart, and he died instantly.

Cynthia Hampton, with a loud cry, threw herself forward across the body of her father; her brother sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. Mrs. Hampton, with a half-sneer, turned coldly away, and Preston stood bolt upright, while tears coursed rapidly down his cheeks, although he showed no outward sign that he was moved.

There is only a word more to say, and that is that when Cynthia Hampton and Preston appeared before the court, and when all the circumstances of their connection with the affair were made clear, both were released upon the representations of Alexander Barnes and the detective, Nick Carter.

And a few months later Cynthia Hampton became the wife of the banker.

THE END.

The next issue of this weekly, No. 552, will be "The White Arm of a Woman; or, Nick Carter's Desperate Chase."


ABOUT THE EARLY NUMBERS OF THE

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We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 30 are entirely out of print. We would like to call the attention of such readers to the fact that nearly all of these stories are now in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give below a catalogue of the Medal Library and can supply any of the issues at 10 cents per copy. We will be glad to send a fine complete catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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